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## THE TOPOGRAPHY OF DIVINE LOVE: A REPLY TO THOMAS TALBOTT

Jeff Jordan

Does God love every human equally and to the deepest degree possible? In an earlier article I argued that no one could, in principle, love every human equally and to the deepest degree possible. Thomas Talbott has objected and argues that a model of the divine love extended equally to all best captures the idea of God as loving parent. I contend that Talbott's argument fails, in part, as it implies that the divine love treats the interests of humans as fungible.

Thomas Talbott has recently defended proposition (L) in response to several arguments I presented against it:

(L): If God exists and is perfect, then God's love must be maximally extended and equally intense.<sup>1</sup>

According to (L), the topography of God's love must be as wide as possible by having every human as its object, and as flat as possible, with every human an equal recipient. The flatness requirement should be understood to require not just equality but also maximal intensity—every human is loved by God to the same maximally significant degree (depth, one might say, as well as flatness and wideness).<sup>2</sup> Proposition (L), then, should be understood as implying that every human is deeply loved by God, and that God equally loves every human, and that God loves every human to the maximal degree possible. Denying (L), then, need not imply, for instance, that there are humans not loved by God, or that God not does love every human equally, or that God does not love deeply. While these would be sufficient for denying (L), they are not necessary.

How might one understand God's love? In the sense relevant here, divine love will have at least two conceptually necessary features: the first consists of God having a disinterested concern for his beloved, while the second involves God taking as his own, or identifying with, the interests of

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<sup>1</sup>"The Topography of Divine Love: A Response to Jeff Jordan," *Faith and Philosophy* 30 (2013), 302–316. See also: Jeff Jordan, "The Topography of the Divine Love," *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (2012), 53–69.

<sup>2</sup>See Jordan, "The Topography of the Divine Love," 53.



the one loved.<sup>3</sup> Of course, given the first feature, it follows that God would identify with no interest incompatible with the beloved's well-being. The first feature—having a disinterested concern for the well-being of one's beloved—serves as a check on the second, since love does not require identifying with interests harmful or destructive or immoral. Moreover, it is plausible to understand the conjunction of the two features as implying that there is a proportionate relationship between the two components, and the degree of love—that is, as one's concern for S increases and as one's identification with the interests of S increases, so too does one's love toward S.<sup>4</sup>

Professor Talbott holds that God is properly understood as the loving parent of every created person, and that the divine parental love must be equal and maximally intense, and so Talbot seeks to defend (L). His defense of (L) rests in large part on the concept of "maximally extended parental love" which Professor Talbott describes as "a property one exemplifies only when one's love extends maximally and with equal intensity to every person that one freely chooses to bring into being, whether it be through procreation or outright creation."<sup>5</sup> With Professor Talbott, let's call this property (PL). There is however a problem with Talbott's formulation of (PL): parents could exemplify (PL) without deeply loving their children, as long as they do so in a uniform way. Suppose Jones only slightly loves his three children, but does so in a uniform and equal way. Jones would have exemplified (PL) even though his parental love would be far from commendable. But let's set aside this quibble, as Talbott holds that God understood as having maximally extended parental love is superior to any model of the divine love which denies that God has that property.<sup>6</sup> Is Professor Talbott right about that?

It will facilitate matters if we adopt a kind of test to evaluate various models of divine parental love. Our test will employ the principle:

(PT): the quality of divine parental love for created persons at least equals that of the best human parental love.

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<sup>3</sup>This characterization of love is influenced by the analysis of love found in Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 79–80.

<sup>4</sup>One may wonder if there are various sorts of love and, if so, the relevance of this variety for the discussion. As it is hard to see how any sort of love (of persons) could fail to incorporate the two features of the lover having a disinterested concern for her beloved, and the lover taking as her own, or identifying with, the interests of the beloved, I set aside this issue.

<sup>5</sup>Talbott, "The Topography of Divine Love: A Response to Jeff Jordan," 304.

<sup>6</sup>Another quibble: Professor Talbott champions exemplifying (LC), a property one has only by loving equally and impartially every Christian (see p. 310). But it is far from clear that one should exemplify (LC). Suppose Jones is the father of Smith. Jones seeks to exemplify (LC) by loving every Christian in the world equally and impartially. Knowing that pious lip-service is worth little, he divides his resources, attentions and affections as equally as he can by various measures, all of which detract from Jones's resources and attentions and affections being spent principally or partially on Smith. It is far from clear that Jones's attempt to exemplify (LC) is prudent or morally commendable or approaches the ideal of the best human parenting mentioned in (PT), since, for one thing, it seems that Smith has cause for a kind of rational resentment toward Jones.

While no doubt vague at points, principle (PT) stipulates that God's love, considered as a kind of parental love, is at least as good as that manifested by exemplary human parents. Theists, of course, typically hold that God's love, whether via its quality or manifestations, far exceeds that characteristic of the very best of human love, but (PT) requires only parity and not superiority. Invoking (PT), a Talbottian might claim that a maximally extended and equally intense love—one perfectly wide and flat and deep—is the only model of divine love which passes muster.

But what if that Talbottian claim is an assertion of the impossible? What if, that is, it is not possible in-principle to love every person uniformly to the same significant degree? Why would loving maximally and equally every person not be possible? Well, different people have different interests. And, if we hold that love has as a necessary constituent identifying with the interests of one's beloved, then there will be an in-principle obstacle, as no one can knowingly and rationally take as his own incompatible interests. We might understand an interest of a person as something the person cares about, or something the person should care about. Identifying with an interest we might understand as, roughly, caring about what one's beloved cares about because one's beloved cares about it, or caring about what one's beloved should care about because one's beloved should care about it. Two interests are incompatible just in case attempts to bring about one of them require that the other be impeded. Suppose you have an ample supply of tickets to an event, which both Smith and Jones greatly desire to attend. But Smith will attend only if Jones does not. Although you prefer going with both, you decide to attend with Jones even though you know this means Smith will not attend. To secure the interests of one may entail thwarting those of another.

Professor Talbott responds by distinguishing between best interests and perceived interests, and he contends that love involves caring about the best interests of one's beloved, and if the best interests of persons are compossible, then a way is open to evade my argument from differing interests contra (L).<sup>7</sup> In my earlier paper I suggested that never suffering solely for the benefit of another is among the best interests of persons, and if God must permit suffering in order to achieve some divine purpose, then it could well be, for all we know, that by permitting suffering God may not be able to identify with the best interests of all persons. But whether that interest is among the best interests of persons or not, the relevance for the issue at hand of the distinction between perceived or mere interests and best interests is far from clear.

For one thing, it is not obvious that identifying only with the best interests of the beloved is characteristic of an exemplary parent, even though identifying with the beloved's interests is characteristic. A child has among her best interests that she be the primary object of her parents' loving

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<sup>7</sup>By "perceived interests" presumably Professor Talbott means interests which are not among one's best interests.

attentions. So, each of two siblings would have this among their respective best interests, and yet a loving parent could not identify with that best interest in both cases.

But set this point aside, as the assumption that the best interests of one person are wholly consonant with those of every other person calls for examination. Let's understand the best interests of a person to be those interests that the person should care about, whether or not she knows those are her best interests, and whether she even in fact cares about those interests.<sup>8</sup> Consider Jones, a participant in a scholarship pageant in which only one contestant will receive a full scholarship to a university—a scholarship vital to Jones's future. When queried about his interests and aspirations as part of the competition, Jones catalogues the usual suspects: world peace and the sustainability of the environment, let's suppose. While world peace and environmental sustainability are arguably ranked among Jones's best interests, so too is winning the contest, as that state of affairs is vital to his future (it is, we might suppose, the sole feasible positive alternative he has), even if it would be impolitic for him to mention it while answering the query. It is obvious that among the best interests any of us have are some compossible with those had by all others. But it is also clear that some are not—Jones's best interest in winning the pageant is not compatible with the best interests of the other contestants as it is in each of their best interests to win the pageant also. If there are zero-sum situations of any sort the winning of which is among the best interests of more than one person, then conflict among the best interests of persons is not just possible, but unavoidable.

But let's set aside the issue of whether the best interests of all persons are compatible—which I deny but a Talbottian endorses—as it is dispositive to note that any love, the divine included, which identified with only those interests of a beloved child interchangeable with those of every other child would run afoul of (PT). The best human parenting identifies not just with the beloved's best interests but also with many of the beloved's less-than-best interests. The two constituent features of love, as noted, entail that love does not require identifying with interests harmful or destructive to the beloved. But, of course, one can have real interests which are not among one's best interests and are neither harmful nor destructive. These real but less than the best interests we might call "secondary interests." Suppose a parent had two children both of whose best interests the parent seeks to identify with, as best he can, and seeks to advance. But that parent also identifies with and seeks to advance the secondary interests of one child, but not the other child. This apparent favoritism or deeper identification with one child over the other would be hard to square with the claim that the parent equally loves both. So, holding that the divine

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<sup>8</sup>Could there be interests a person should care about even though they are not among her best interests? If there could be, then understanding best interests as interests one should care about is a necessary but not sufficient property.

love identifies only with the best interests of created persons, and that the best interests of each are fungible with those of every other, has the divine love falling short of the love characteristic of the best of human parenting.

Moreover, no one could credibly hold that the secondary interests of persons do not conflict, as there clearly are zero-sum situations the winning of which is among the interests of persons—going to the event is in the interests of both Smith and Jones, let's suppose, but as there is only one ticket remaining, they both cannot attend. Considering secondary interests, conflict is not just possible, as Talbott concedes, but unavoidable.<sup>9</sup>

The affirmation of (L) via (PL) runs counter of (PT) in a second way. Suppose, for example, that one held that salvation is the sole best interest of every human, and that universal salvation was possible, and in that way, sought to support (L). Could God identify with this single best interest of each created person? Perhaps so, but if that is the only interest that God identifies with, then it is hard to see how God could be said to deeply love humans, since, arguably, the more interests one identifies with and the greater the concern for one's beloved, the more deeply one loves that beloved. So, God would not love humans in the deepest way. In addition, if God identifies only with those best interests common to all humans, then God would not love individuals as regards their particularity and singularity. Exemplifying (PL) would require, in effect, that God treat humans as interchangeable, as God would identify only with those interests identical with the interests of all others. But exemplary human parents treat neither their children nor their children's interests as fungible. So, if God identifies only with those interests common to all, then God does not deeply love humans, or God does not love individuals as regards their particularity and singularity. Either way, principle (PT) has again been violated.

But could God treat the interests of persons as fungible while at the same time not treating those individuals as being fungible? That is, could God love individuals in their particularity or singularity, while identifying only with those interest common to all persons? No: if we understand love as, in part, identifying with the beloved's interests, then no one could identify only with those interests of Jones common to all others and yet love Jones as a particular individual.<sup>10</sup> One could of course deny that love has as a conceptual part the identification by the lover with the interests of her beloved. It is especially hard, however, to see a plausible reason for denying that parental love implies such identification. If identification is a necessary part of parental love, then it is clear that exemplifying (PL) would disqualify the divine love from matching the quality of love found

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<sup>9</sup>See "The Topography of Divine Love: A Response to Jeff Jordan," 312–313.

<sup>10</sup>While more needs to be said here, it is important to note that love focusing, at least in part, on the particularity and singularity of individuals explains, in part, why a universal and impartial love, with no variance, cannot be the deepest kind of love. The deepest kind of love involves a kind of exclusivity or partiality and does not devalue the beloved by treating her, in effect, as a fungible. A perfectly flat love, that is, cannot have the greatest depth.

among the best human parents and, consequently, Talbott's primary case for (L) via the concept of maximally extended love fails.

Professor Talbott also supports (L) by a kind of transitivity of love argument:

P1: if S loves S\*, then, for any person P, if P loves S then P must also love S\*.

And,

P2: for any person S, S will love someone and will be loved by someone.

So,

C1: every person will be loved equally and fully as any other.<sup>11</sup>

What should we say about (P1)–(C1)? The first premise looks manifestly false: suppose Jones loves Juliet and is a rival with Greene for her hand. In fact, Juliet loves Greene. Does it follow from loving Juliet, that Jones must also love Greene, his rival for her hand? This seems doubtful. Or suppose Juliet's love for Greene is pathological or harmful or imprudent. It surely cannot be that Jones too must love Greene, or will that Juliet love Greene. Additionally, the inference of (C1) from (P1) and (P2) is invalid, as (P2) can be satisfied even if Greene and Juliet love only each other, and are loved by no one else.

Finally, Professor Talbott suggests that my arguments against (L) are reminiscent of a statement of Calvin: "For as Jacob, deserving nothing by good works, is taken into grace, Esau, as yet undefiled by any crime, is hated."<sup>12</sup> It may be of interest, however, to recall that Thomas Aquinas also formulated and presented an argument contra (L), so arguing against (L) may not suffice to paint one a Calvinist (not that there's anything wrong with that . . .).<sup>13</sup> But in any case, to be fair to Calvin, the remark quoted by Professor Talbott is simply Calvin's paraphrase of *Romans* 9:13—a troubling verse no doubt for any who embrace (L).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>I have substituted "loves" for "wills the best" in my reconstruction of Talbott's argument, since our discussion is about love, and we have been given no reason to hold that love and willing the best are interchangeable. See Talbott, "The Topography of Divine Love: A Response to Jeff Jordan," 315.

<sup>12</sup>Talbott, "The Topography of Divine Love: A Response to Jeff Jordan," 302.

<sup>13</sup>See *Summa Theologica*, Ia<sup>e</sup>, Q. 20, A.3.

<sup>14</sup>I thank Thomas Flint, Douglas Stalker, and Thomas Talbott for their generous comments.